

BELONGING

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"Love must be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lack diligence; be fervent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep."

- ROMANS 12:9-15 HOLMAN CHRISTIAN STANDARD BIBLE (HCSB)

The power of belonging has long been acknowledged by social scientists. Our very survival as individuals begins as extremely dependent newborns. The bond of family, clan, friends and community form an indispensable foundation to our lives. Our relationships or lack thereof can determine our very viability.

Many of us have felt both the joy of belonging and the grief of exclusion. Who hasn't been a part of some childhood game where two captains were selected and then they alternately selected, one team mate at a time from the group. To be chosen early gave you a highly valued rank on the team whereas to be chosen last, or not chosen at all could cause great emotional pain.

You probably have experienced both: A time of feeling very much a part of a group or tribe and another time where you were clearly excluded. And as we mature we can even begin to sense when the connection, the relationship is real and deep or just superficial, or worse simply pretend. Our close friends and family share both our joys and our sorrows. They love us with a love that makes it clear – we belong.

Faith communities extol the power and value of this loving relationship. We talk about our communities of worship as families. We expect to belong and be welcomed by those who share our religious beliefs and practices. The Apostle Paul's exhortation to the church in Rome emphasized how we were to be in relationship with one another, Romans 12.9-15. He wrote that we were to "outdo" each other in our show of respect, love and honor. This loving relational approach even extended beyond our immediate circles and was to become a means of identification, as a way to know who was a member of the faith.

Imagine the difficulties faced by the wanderers in our world; by the thousands displaced by war, violence, disaster and despair. Refugees stuck without a country. Where can you go when you do not speak the language, are not able to become citizens, are denied access to work and basic human services?

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In Cairo, a partner of Church World Service: StARS (St. Andrew's Refugee Services) is providing a new family for refugees that have lost almost all sense of belonging. What began modestly as a language ministry by St. Andrew's Church in the 70's has grown into a loving community. At StARS refugees can access legal assistance, psycho-social support and counseling, basic medical care, case management, adult education, and school for their children. The StARS staff is predominantly comprised of refugees who fully understand the challenges and scars of loss and exclusion. They have grown into a family that offers refuge, solace, healing, opportunities to learn and work and most importantly, a place to belong.

As a family, they care for one another. Arij Ahmed, a member of the Youth Advisory Board of StARS helped to explain how their group, comprised of young refugees for the purpose leadership training and program review, noticed there was a great need for the young refugee mothers to have pre-school for their kids and an infant room. The lack of these special services prevented mothers from being able to access the other available services and to seek work opportunities to help their families. We know how critical the early years of childhood are for developing minds and bodies. And we know that it is difficult to find safe, quality pre-school for an affordable price. And yet, such services are even more critical for refugee families. Space was found at a sister Church for The Montessori Preschool Program, a preschool for children ages 3-6 years old.

Now there is an unabated patter of small feet on the playground. Racing and chasing trailed by shouts of joy. The start of a new school day is always a day of hope; it is an opportunity to learn. School is a special gift to children unable to attend the local Egyptian schools. Unable to attend because they are refugees. StARS is filling a vital need for the children of refugees. Here they play, study and find a safe space. Here they find the welcome of family. Here they belong.

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